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A proposal to dismantle the closed Zion nuclear plant will be up for discussion during a public forum Thursday organized by Exelon Nuclear, which owns the Lake Michigan landmark.

Exelon has hired a private company to move up the timetable for decommissioning the plant, which closed 10 years ago. If the Nuclear Regulatory Agency approves the plan, it will take another decade to return the land to its natural state, opening up 250 acres of prime lakefront property, officials said.

"We hope the public will attend and ask questions," Zion Mayor Lane Harrison said. "We have some questions for Exelon as well."

He and other community leaders will attend the open house, set for 4 to 8 p.m. at the Shepherd's Crook Golf Course Club House, 351 Green Bay Rd.

"The city's primary interest is the disposal of the land afterward," Harrison said. "It should be turned over so some development can occur on the property for the city's benefit."

EnergySolutions Inc. of Salt Lake City will be available for questions. The company has said it can do the job quicker and cheaper than Exelon, moving up the decommissioning work by a decade.

Workers would take the two-reactor facility apart and move everything but the spent fuel rods out of state by rail.

The spent fuel rods would be encased in 17-foot-tall concrete and lead casks that will remain on the Zion site more than 400 feet from the lake, officials said. Though Exelon describes the

casks as a safe, highly regulated method of storing radioactive waste, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk and industry critics say they are skeptical, especially because of the casks' proximity to the region's main source of water, Lake Michigan.

EnergySolutions would transfer the low-level radioactive equipment to its own disposal facility in Clive, Utah, officials said.

After the dismantling, city officials would like Exelon to move an electrical switchyard and relocate power lines to make the land more attractive for development, Harrison said.

He envisions townhouses amid a parklike setting, as well as an expanded railroad station with parking. Illinois Beach State Park, whose north and south sections are separated by the plant, could be connected with beaches and trails, Harrison said.

"We've been talking to the mayor as well as other county officials and they have provided their feedback for what to do with the land," said Krista Lopykinski, spokeswoman for Exelon Nuclear. "We really want to get through these other hurdles before we get to that point."

Exelon expects to learn if its plan is approved by the federal nuclear regulatory agency later this year. The company also awaits a ruling by the Internal Revenue Service on whether it can transfer a decommissioning fund to EnergySolutions, Lopykinski said.